

What is encephalitis?

Encephalitis means inflammation of the brain. It can occur as a primary illness or as a result of another illness. Severe cases of encephalitis are rare.

Who gets encephalitis?

Anyone can get encephalitis, but young children, older adults, and persons with weakened immune systems are more at risk.

How is encephalitis spread?

Primary encephalitis most often occurs when a virus directly infects the brain. Viruses that are carried by mosquitoes and ticks can cause primary encephalitis. Other viruses can cause an illness and have encephalitis develop as a complication of the viral illness. When encephalitis develops after another infection or, rarely, after receiving some vaccines, it is called post-infectious encephalitis. Post-infectious encephalitis most commonly follows a bout of chickenpox, mumps, or measles, or vaccination against measles.

What are the symptoms of encephalitis?

Encephalitis frequently causes headache, fever, confused thinking, seizures, or problems with vision, speech, or movement. Infants and young children might have nausea, vomiting, body stiffness, constant crying, and poor feeding.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

Encephalitis may occur within two to three weeks after symptoms of a viral illness appear.

How is encephalitis diagnosed?

Anyone with a severe headache, fever, and altered consciousness should seek medical care immediately. Because the onset is usually sudden and severe, emergency care is often sought for this illness. Special tests are needed to confirm the diagnosis.

What is the treatment for encephalitis?

Doctors will prescribe antiviral drugs, anti-inflammatory drugs, or other treatments as needed. A person with encephalitis needs hospital care.

How can encephalitis be prevented?

Prevention involves preventing the initial viral illnesses in the first place. That is, the key is to prevent exposures to viruses that can cause illnesses that can lead to encephalitis as a complication. This can be done through practicing good hand washing and receiving all recommended vaccines. Protecting yourself against exposure to mosquitoes and ticks is a good way to prevent primary encephalitis.

What should I do if I've been in contact with a person who has encephalitis?

You will not catch encephalitis from someone who has it. If the encephalitis resulted from another disease, such as measles, and you had contact with the person while he or she was sick with the initial disease, you may need some protection from that disease (for example, vaccination).

How can I get more information about encephalitis?

- If you have concerns about encephalitis, contact your healthcare provider.
- Call your local health department. A directory of local health departments is located at <http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/local-health-districts/>.

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